

About fears and worries

Everyone experiences fear

It is one of the most basic human emotions, helping to keep us safe by alerting us to danger. The fear response prepares us to flee or withdraw from threatening situations.

An important part of children's growth involves learning how to cope with the common fears of childhood. As children learn to manage their emotions and overcome everyday fears, their confidence grows for taking on new challenges. Parents and carers and school staff can play a critical role in helping children develop skills for managing feelings and coping with fear.

How children experience fear

Fear reactions are made up of physical changes, feelings and behaviours. The body responds to fear by speeding up the heart rate and breathing so that we can act quickly to respond to danger. Along with this we may experience physical symptoms such as feeling tightness in the chest, getting shaky or sweaty, or having 'butterflies in the stomach'. Sometimes people turn pale with fear – usually when the fear is very strong. Children often simply describe the unpleasant feelings in the stomach as 'feeling sick'. These sorts of physical responses to fear are associated with psychological responses such as feeling scared, tense, nervous or worried.

Children who experience fear are more likely to show us than tell us that they are afraid. They may do this by seeking reassurance, by trying to avoid the situation that makes them fearful, by becoming agitated or by becoming upset. If the situation that makes them fearful is one they cannot avoid they may try to get a parent, carer or other trusted adult to deal with it for them. Some behaviours that adults frequently find annoying, like nagging and whingeing, result from children's attempts to avoid situations they are afraid of.

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How children experience fear – continued

Age	Common fears	How thinking is involved
Early infancy	Loud noises Loss of support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Senses stimulate infant learning• Aware of dependence on caregiver
Late infancy 8–15 months	Strangers Separations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Associates unknown person with risk• Realises that parent or carer is missing
Preschool 2–4 years	Imaginary creatures such as monsters Potential burglars The dark	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagination is a major thinking tool• May not distinguish fantasy from reality
Early primary age 5–7 years	Natural disasters (eg fire, thunder) Injury Animals Fears related to TV viewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to think in concrete logical terms• Fears relate to dangers that have a basis in reality
Upper primary age 8–11 years	Sports and school performance Fear of failure Illness and death	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluates own performance by comparison with others• Sense of self tied to achievement
Adolescence 12–18 years	Peer rejection Fear of ridicule Meeting new people	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to think in more abstract ways• Able to anticipate the future in more detail• Self-esteem related to peer relationships

As noted above, pre-school children's fears of imaginary things, such as fearing that monsters are under the bed, shows their use of imagination in thinking and play. Once children develop logical thinking it allows them to think through the things that make them afraid and to filter out those things that are purely imaginary. The focus of school-age children's fears is therefore more likely to be realistic and to involve things that do or could actually happen to them. The fears of children in upper primary school are commonly about getting hurt or being embarrassed in social situations.

The development of thinking also means that fearful situations can be anticipated and worried about. By later primary school, children's thinking ability has developed enough that they can worry about things that haven't happened yet. They may begin to worry about school tests or about not being liked by peers. The physical symptoms associated with fear are also present when children worry. They are not as strong but they last longer. Even though imaginary fears decrease with age, some childhood fears, such as fear of the dark and fear of death, continue into adulthood. Research has shown that females generally experience or report higher levels of fear than males do.

Why some children are more fearful than others

All the fears described in the previous table are normal. Most children will experience them to some degree. But some children seem to experience fears more strongly or more frequently than other children.

Children with an anxious temperament may cry more easily than others, be more 'clingy' with parents and carers, or try to avoid doing new things so they won't have to feel scared. They are also often more shy than average and find it hard to join in groups or talk to people they don't know well. Children with an anxious temperament seem to experience the physical symptoms of fear more easily and more quickly than others. It is especially important for these children to learn skills to cope with fear and anxiety.





Skills for coping with fears and worries

Learning to manage fear involves social and emotional skills for self-awareness and self-management. Children need to learn to recognise and manage physical symptoms, anxious thinking and fearful behaviours. Depending on the ways an individual child responds to fear, they may experience the kinds of symptoms included in the left column of the table below. Skills that can help children to manage these symptoms are listed on the right.

Physical symptoms

Butterflies in stomach
Shortness of breath
Feeling sick
Heart racing

Fearful thinking

Something bad is going to happen; I can't do this; I'm going to get hurt; People will laugh at me; This is too much for me to handle.

Pessimistic thinking, such as expecting the worst

Fearful behaviours

Seeks reassurance
Cries
Tries to avoid scary situations
Acts shy
Gets agitated

Relaxation skills

Notice physical symptoms and recognise they are signs of nervousness
Deep breathing techniques for calming nervousness
Relaxation techniques

Helpful thinking

I can manage this; I can be brave; It doesn't have to be perfect; I've got through this sort of thing before, so I can do it again.

Optimistic thinking, such as: *Things will work out okay – they usually do.*

Coping behaviours

Plan and rehearse how child will handle the scary situation (eg establish a bedtime ritual, keep a torch by the bed)
Build confidence for social situations by learning and practising assertive behaviours

Key points for supporting children's coping skills

For children to learn to manage fear effectively they need adult support and guidance. Acknowledging children's fears is an important first step. Helping children to understand how fear affects their bodies and thinking is the next step in teaching them how to manage it. Parents and carers also have an important role in showing children how to apply helpful coping skills to reduce fearful feelings.

Provide times to talk

Your support and encouragement will help your child to attempt what at first seems scary. Show you understand by acknowledging how your child feels. You can help children recognise when they are feeling scared by naming the feelings, for example: "It sounds like you're a bit worried about..." or "You're feeling a bit scared, are you?" Labelling fears in this way helps children to see that feeling scared is a normal feeling that can be managed.

Model appropriate behaviour

Children learn a lot about how to get through difficult situations in life from the examples set by parents and carers. If a child comes to share a worry with you and they see you are also worried, they can lose confidence and become more fearful. If instead you can stay calm and deal with stressful situations, you are actually helping them to learn coping skills. Better still, you can talk out loud with them about how you deal with fear and worry. This helps children see that even grownups get scared or worried at times, and that feeling scared is something you understand and can help them with.



Build confidence and independence in small steps

Having successes helps build confidence. When children are set small challenges that they can succeed at, it can support their confidence for doing more things independently. For example, you may get your child to buy an everyday item from a shop on his own. If that is too difficult then you can make the task more manageable by breaking it into smaller steps. You might stand near at first while he talks to the sales assistant. When he can do this, you may prompt him to go into the shop alone.

Spend time preparing for a scary situation before it happens

Prepare children for situations they may find scary by planning ahead and practising ideas about what to do. Children don't learn when they are already fearful, because fear makes it hard for them to remember what you are saying. Preparation and practice help them use their coping skills and see that they can manage.

If ongoing fear and worry make it hard for children to enjoy life or interfere with their ability to manage everyday activities at home, at school or socially, they may need help for an anxiety difficulty.

For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on children with anxiety.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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